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# Close Fire Support

## Sexton Self-Propelled Guns of the 23rd Field Regiment, 1942-1945

Andrew Iarocci

On the battlefields of the First World War, initially successful attacks all too often ended in failure because artillery weapons could not be moved up quickly enough to support assault infantry at the sharp end of the fight. As the first tanks appeared on the battlefields in late 1916, British designers tabled ideas for self-propelled gun carriages capable of negotiating difficult terrain, carrying their own loads of ammunition and providing some degree of protection for their crews. One design that never made it off the drawing board was the ED3 Emplacement Destroyer, a 27,000-pound vehicle mounting a 4.5-inch howitzer.<sup>1</sup> Surviving sketches of this unrealized concept bear a striking similarity to a series of self-propelled guns employed during the Second World War. One of these was the Canadian-designed and manufactured Sexton 25-pounder.

The immediate origins of the Sexton can be traced to the Bishop, a 25-pounder gun mounted on a Valentine tank chassis, originally intended for an anti-tank role in the North African campaign. By the time that the Bishop reached the field, the stop-gap requirement for 25-pounder anti-tank guns had passed with the arrival of purpose-built 6-pounders. There was still some interest, however, in using the Bishop as a self-propelled artillery platform for indirect fire in combination with armoured units. Compared with its towed counterparts, the self-propelled 25-pounder could better keep pace with mobile operations over rough terrain, just as the ED3 was supposed to keep up with offensives on the Western Front

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during the First World War. The problem with the Bishop was its patch-work design. Because the vehicle's gun platform boasted an exceptionally massive profile, it was difficult to conceal on the battlefield. The gun itself was cramped inside an armoured box, with only 15 degrees of elevation and a mere four degrees of traverse to the left or right. A much better candidate for cooperation with armoured divisions was the American M7 Priest, a 105 mm gun mounted on a Lee tank chassis. But while the Priest design was far superior to the Bishop, its gun was the wrong caliber for British and Commonwealth armies, whose artillery assets were based on the 25-pounder rather than the 105 mm. Consequently, the British Military Mission in Washington requested that the US Army Ordnance Department rework the M7 to accommodate the 25-pounder. Although a prototype was completed in mid-1941, the project was soon dropped as a consequence of other design and production commitments in the United States. The British now turned to Canada, with hopes that a self-propelled 25-pounder might be manufactured there for use by British and Commonwealth forces. The result of the Canadian design effort was to be known as the Sexton.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast with traditional towed artillery, relatively little has been written on Canada's Second World War self-propelled guns or the men who operated them in battle. This article explores the employment of the Sexton by the 23rd Field Regiment (SP), Royal Canadian Artillery, of the 4th







A Sexton is driven on a test course at Montreal, 1943.

Canadian Armoured Division. Formed at Camp Petawawa in the spring of 1942, the 23rd Field Regiment was the only Canadian SP regiment to be equipped with Sextons throughout its overseas service. Although two other regiments, the 8th and 19th Field, were also Sexton outfits at various times, the 23rd Field makes for a useful case study because of its uninterrupted employment of Sextons in combat during 1944-45.

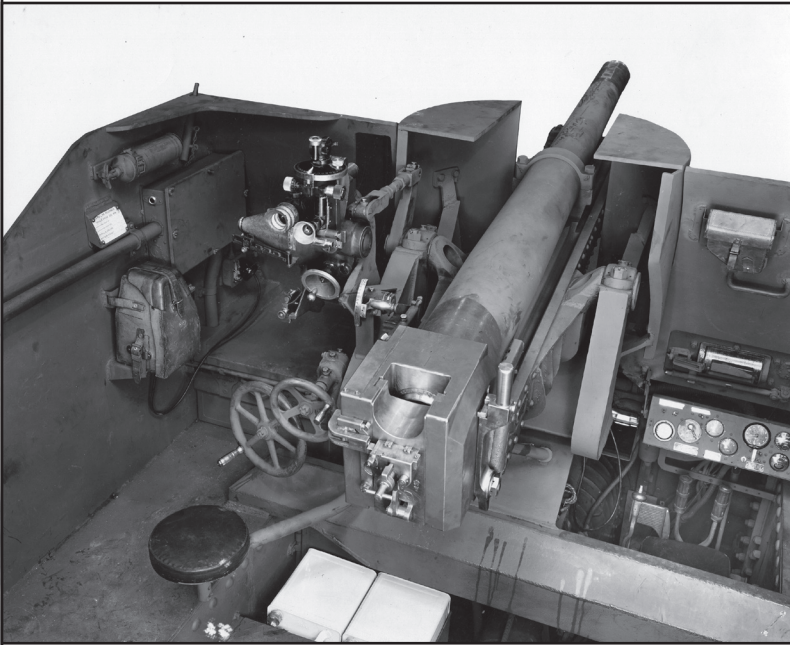
Veterans of the regiment take justifiable pride in their record as self-propelled gunners. Yet like so much about the Second World War, self-propelled artillery operations in practice did not always turn out as they had been anticipated in theory. Although the 23rd Field was honed to a sharp edge for mobile operations, much of its shooting from Normandy to the Rhineland was along more traditional lines. There were indeed several instances where the SP guns "crashed" into action, according to the doctrine of mechanized warfare. But because the struggle to liberate Northwest Europe was often a slow

and methodical grind, the 23rd Field gunners also found themselves engaged in semi-static operations.

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The Sexton was the product of a marriage between the Canadian Ram tank chassis and the ubiquitous 25-pounder field gun. Developed by the Department of Munitions and Supply Army Engineering Design Branch, the first prototype vehicle was completed at the Montreal Locomotive Works in June 1942, and shipped to Britain for trials, where it performed excellently. The new SP was officially designated "Sexton" in May 1943, following the British practice of naming self-propelled guns after church officials. Approximately 2,150 machines were built between 1943 and 1945 – 124 under a Canadian contract and 2,026 for the British.<sup>3</sup> Like other SP guns of the Second World War, the Sexton was designed to operate in conjunction with armoured forces. This meant it could travel



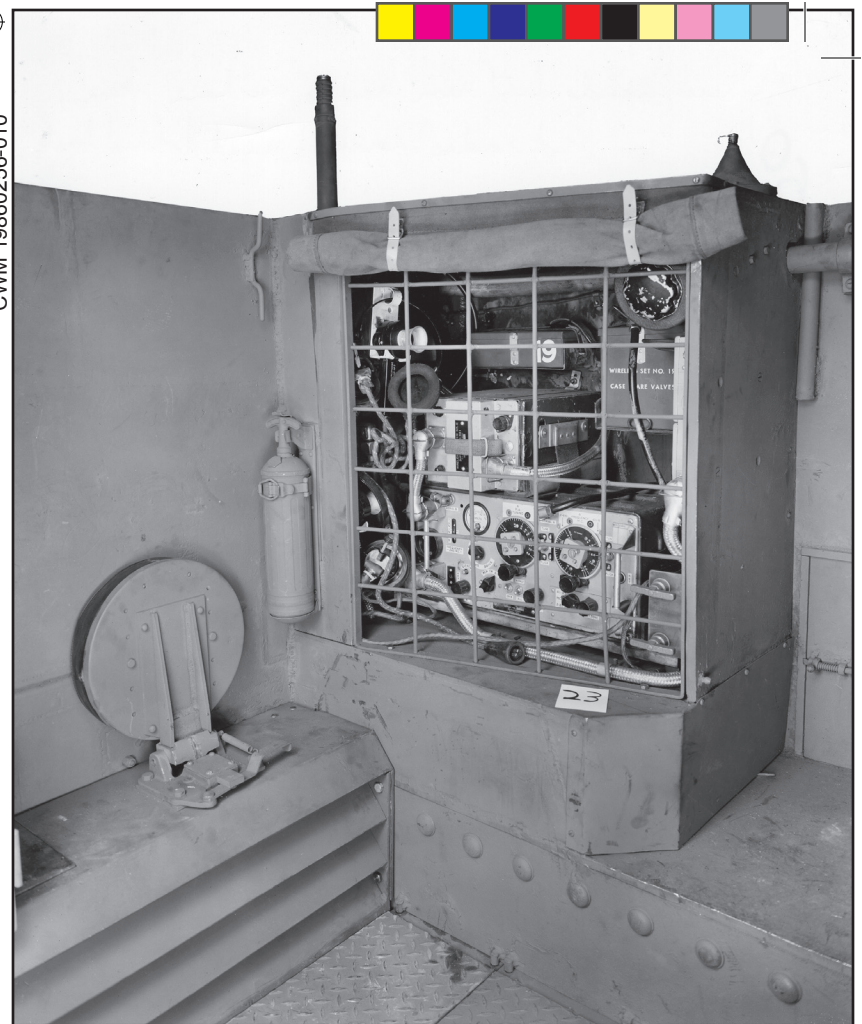


**Above:** A view of the fighting compartment, looking forward. The driver's seat and instruments are visible at lower right.

**Right:** A view of the No.19 wireless cabinet in the left rear corner of the fighting compartment. Larry Holleran, a veteran of the 23rd Field Regiment, recalls listening to BBC broadcasts on these sets.

over the same ground at roughly the same rate as contemporary tanks and armoured vehicles. With a gross combat weight of 57,000 pounds, the Sexton stood eight feet high, and was capable of cross country speeds up to 20 miles per hour. The power plant was a nine-cylinder Continental R975-C4 radial air-cooled engine. In addition to its six-man detachment, each vehicle carried approximately 105 rounds for the 25-pounder gun (87 smoke and/or high explosive rounds, 18 armour-piercing rounds), plus about 2,000 rounds of small arms ammunition for the gun detachment's defensive weapons.<sup>4</sup>

The commander – or “No.1” – of a Sexton gun detachment was a sergeant. His primary responsibility was to ensure that the entire gun system operated properly under all circumstances. Normally the No.1 received orders directly from the gun position officer (GPO) for indirect fire, but if the detachment were to engage enemy armour with individual direct fire, the No.1 was fully responsible for fire control once he received the initial engagement order. The role of the No.2 gunner in the detachment was to operate the breech mechanism and ram shells home once they were loaded. It was the job of the No.3 gunner to lay and fire the gun. The Nos.4 and 5 gunners were in charge of ammunition



supply, with No.4 loading the rounds and No.5 ensuring that shells were available, clean and ready to fire. The No.6 man was the driver. Although not directly involved in the firing of the gun, No.6 remained in his driver's seat in case it was necessary to start the engine and slew the vehicle along a different line to engage a target beyond the gun's normal traverse, which was limited to 25 degrees left and 15 degrees right (unlike the Bishop, the Sexton's gun was capable of maximum elevation). Precise steering was not a simple matter, particularly if the mount was parked on soft or uneven ground.

It was usually up to the No.1 to man the wireless, which consisted of two components, the “A” and “B” sets. Bill Turner, one of the original officers to serve in the 23rd Field Regiment, recalls that the “A” set was used for intercommunication and to pass orders from the troop command post (CP) to the gun detachments, while the “B” set was used to listen in on higher level traffic coming from the regimental level. But as veteran Larry Holleran remembers, the radio sets were most useful for tuning in the BBC news.<sup>5</sup>

A GPO, with the rank of senior lieutenant, was in charge of each troop of four guns. His job was to receive firing orders, plot the line and range,





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A Sexton's 25-pounder gun is tested at high elevation at a Montreal range, November 1944. Unlike the earlier Bishop design, the Sexton gun was capable of maximum elevation. Traverse, however, was limited to 25 degrees left and 15 degrees right.

send this information to the guns, give the order to fire, lead the reconnaissance party and locate the new firing position. Consequently, when his troop was on the move, the GPO had to know his exact map reference at all times, to ensure that an unseen target could be accurately engaged with a minimum of ranging rounds. One of the GPO's great challenges was to find an open, accessible firing position, well protected from the enemy, and free from such obstructions as hills, trees or buildings in the line of fire.<sup>6</sup>

### The 23rd Field Regiment

The 23rd Field Regiment was composed of three batteries – the 31st, mostly Toronto men, the 36th, from the Cobourg area, and the 83rd, with men from Hamilton, Brantford and St. Catharines. A handful of the men in the regiment were career soldiers, some had already seen active service in England, and at least one man, Hank Levy, was a veteran of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>7</sup> Most, however, were new to military life, so training began with the basics: marching, saluting, map-reading, respirator drill, first aid, military law and small arms instruction at Petawawa.<sup>8</sup> Later in the summer of 1942, the regiment relocated to Sussex, New Brunswick,

where it joined the short-lived 7th Canadian Division and continued with training.

Early in 1943 the 650 officers and men of the 23rd Field learned that their regiment, along with the 8th and 19th Field Regiments, was to convert from towed to self-propelled mounts.<sup>9</sup> A year earlier, General A.G.L. McNaughton, then in command of Canada's overseas army, decided that one of the field artillery regiments in each Canadian armoured division was to be equipped with self-propelled guns.<sup>10</sup> As such, the 23rd Field was to join the 4th Canadian Armoured Division overseas, while the 8th Field ultimately served with the 5th Canadian Armoured Division in Italy. As an army field regiment, the 19th Field was destined to support the 3rd Canadian Division in Operation Overlord (with Priests), but was later attached to the 4th Armoured Division and then the Second Armoured Brigade (with Sextons).

In February 1943, before any Sextons arrived at Sussex, a group of drivers from the 23rd Field set out for Camp Borden's armoured training centre to learn about the new SP mounts. As well, some officers travelled to Virginia to participate in exercises with the 5th American Armoured Division. Meanwhile, the regimental commander, Lieutenant-Colonel K.N. Lander, made his way back to Petawawa to observe SP trials.<sup>11</sup>





Workers at the Montreal Locomotive Works lower the Sexton's specially designed 25-pounder into its mount, summer 1943. The muzzle brake has not yet been fitted to the gun barrel.

By late April of 1943 the first Sextons were unloaded at Sussex, where they were greeted with awe by the gunners of the 23rd. Within about two weeks each battery had two of its eight Sextons on strength, but with no high-octane fuel available, the mounts were grounded for the moment.<sup>12</sup> With the Sextons' higher degree of mobility came several official name changes for the regiment. The first new title was 23rd Field Regiment (SP), Royal Canadian Artillery, and subsequently, the 23rd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery (RCHA). The minor difference between the two was quite significant from a military cultural standpoint, as the RCHA regimental title was the preserve of permanent force artillery units, traditionally equipped with lighter guns for speedier horse-drawn transport. (The irony of granting "horse" artillery status to an armoured SP regiment seems to have been lost at the time.) In any event, the prospect of new shoulder titles and buttons was a source of some novelty for the gunners of the 23rd Field. The RCHA establishment was displeased, however, so the 23rd reverted to normal RCA status in November 1943, after arriving in England.<sup>13</sup>

### An Army on Wheels and Tracks

Even as late as 1918, the Canadian Expeditionary Force of the First World War relied heavily on horses for daily transport needs. The Canadian Army of the Second World War, in contrast, was completely mechanized, something of a novelty in an age when most civilians did not yet own or drive private cars. From a technical perspective, authorities invested considerable energy in their efforts to train effective drivers for the new fleets of wheeled vehicles. Such skills as knowing when to downshift versus when to brake made a big difference for the longevity of the generation of trucks in use during the early 1940s.<sup>14</sup> Once these skills had been mastered,

Workers complete the installation of a 25-pounder gun.

The three men standing in the right rear corner of the fighting compartment give a sense of the close-quarters working environment for the gun detachment. Countless hours of drill were essential for crews to operate safely and effectively in this small space.



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This series of photographs (above and opposite below) taken at Tilburg, the Netherlands, in March 1945 shows gunners of the 19th Field Regiment performing various maintenance tasks on their Sextons, including paintwork and gun overhaul.

drivers enjoyed the newly discovered freedom that motor transport offered, which introduced a host of problems for transport officers. Unofficial and unauthorized drives in military cars and trucks were difficult for soldiers to resist during their off-duty hours, especially when civilian areas, with their usual attractions, were in near proximity. The consequence was wasted fuel and extra wear and tear on vehicles that were already difficult enough to maintain, with spares often in short supply. Increasingly strict rules were introduced, to the point that a man caught driving without a work ticket was liable to be charged and paraded before the regimental commander for a court martial.<sup>15</sup>

The difficulties involved in maintaining large motorized vehicle fleets reveal that Allied forces did not always enjoy the lavish material superiority that popular memory ascribes to them. Anti-freeze, for instance, was chronically in short supply. As a stop-gap, water was often used to cool engines, even during seasons when there was a risk of freezing. The only answer was to drain a vehicle's cooling system when it was expected to be parked for more than a short while. Other basic automotive supplies, such as paint, were also scarce. In the 23rd Field, gunners naturally tended to climb all over their SP mounts, wearing the paint off in the process. Soon they were restricted to mounting and dismounting the vehicle only by the ladders welded on to the armour plate, to save paint wear on the rest of the vehicle.<sup>16</sup> Veterans of the

regiment do not remember ever following the regulation.

The introduction of the tracked SP gun mounts in the 23rd Field, with their greater technical complexity, presented new challenges for the gunners and drivers who were accustomed to towed guns and wheeled vehicles. Walter "Chick" Sills, a 21-year-old GPO, later recalled that the SP "was much larger" than a towed gun, "with a lot more pieces of equipment that we had to account for and look after."<sup>17</sup> While the tracked mount provided some degree of protection for its crew, it was also more difficult to conceal than a towed gun. Self-propelled guns could "crash" into action faster than towed artillery, but carriage-mounted guns were capable of more rapid all around traverse.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Ram-based Sexton clearly did not lend itself to joy-riding to the same extent as the regiment's cars and trucks, learning to operate the SP was a different matter entirely from wheeled transport; tracked-vehicle driving was an art as much as a technical skill. It is instructive to consider a short excerpt from the 1943 Sexton operators' manual describing the synchro-mesh transmission:

Due to the weight of revolving gears and shafts it is necessary to use the double de-clutching method when changing gears. This reduces excessive strain and wear on the synchronizing cones.



A quick gear change is essential due to the high rolling resistance of the vehicle. If the operation is not carried out quickly, particularly on grass or heavy going the vehicle may have time to come to rest while the change is being made. With practice a driver will become adept and gear change can be made with negligible loss of speed.<sup>19</sup>

Steering was also a challenge requiring much care and good judgement, especially when negotiating uneven terrain at high speed. In at least a few instances, the young drivers of these 57,000-pound machines seem to have pushed the limits of good sense, as the following regimental order suggests:

Drivers of SP mounts will at all times bear in mind that they are driving a very heavy vehicle which if not carefully and properly handled becomes a serious menace to life and property. The greatest care must be exercised at all times. Drivers will avoid making quick turns on roads, as it invariably damages the surface. It is most undesirable that we should have the SP mounts grounded as a result of damage due to carelessness or lack of intelligent driving.<sup>20</sup>

Extra hazard accompanied driving in built-up areas. Upon returning from an exercise outside of Eastbourne, England, a wayward Sexton crashed through the brick fence of a home, demolishing a garden and coming to rest with its gun barrel aimed directly at the front window. An apologetic Canadian officer was relieved by the homeowner's response: "my dear boy, I would much rather it be you than the Germans."<sup>21</sup>

Beyond their technical complexities, the SP mounts provoked tactical questions among

the men who were to operate them in combat. As the regiment completed its training in New Brunswick, and later in England, there was much talk of rapid deployments at the apex of wild armoured thrusts deep into contested territory. Gun position officers wondered how they would keep up with the SP platforms at such high speeds in rough country. Soft-skinned trucks or thinly armoured universal carriers seemed inadequate, assuming that enemy tanks, infantry or anti-tank guns might be nearby. In early 1943, while still training in New Brunswick, regimental officers in the 23rd Field convened the GPOPA ("Gun Position Officers Protective Association"). After some discussion, the GPOPA members prudently decided that some sort of armoured vehicle similar to the Sexton, but without a gun, would serve well as a mobile command post. Although the regiment forwarded proposals to National Defence Headquarters in 1943, no such machines arrived until two years later, when the regiment received six GPO command vehicles during the liberation of Holland. Armoured half-tracks would have to do in the meantime.

The regiment's forward observation officers (FOOs) took even greater risks, as it was their job to move ahead with the infantry and tanks in search of targets for the artillery. In the SP regiments, FOOs were equipped with armoured observation posts (OPs) in the form of Ram tanks with dummy guns. Normally the OP vehicles operated directly alongside the armoured regiments they supported, within the armoured division. The problem with this arrangement was that the armoured regiments in 4th Division were equipped with Shermans, not Rams. As 23rd



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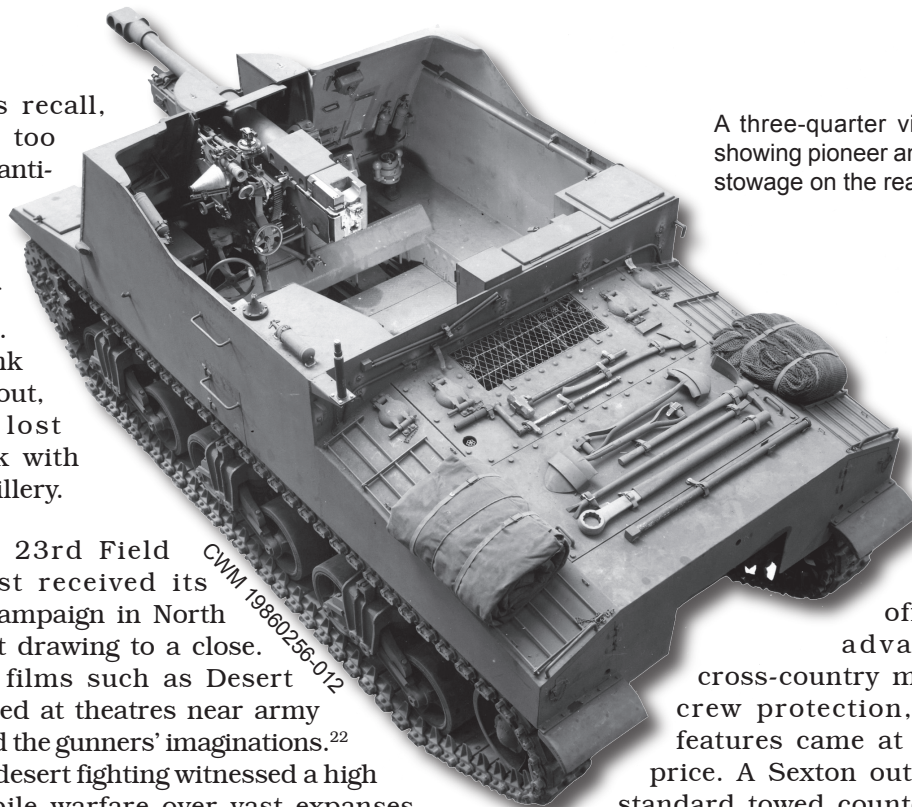
Field veterans recall, it was always too easy for enemy anti-tank gunners to pick out the Ram OP in a troop of Sherman tanks. Once the OP tank was knocked out, the tankers lost their best link with supporting artillery.

When the 23rd Field Regiment first received its Sextons, the campaign in North Africa was just drawing to a close. Documentary films such as *Desert Victory*, screened at theatres near army camps, sparked the gunners' imaginations.<sup>22</sup> Three years of desert fighting witnessed a high degree of mobile warfare over vast expanses of open ground. It seemed like the perfect environment for self-propelled artillery. A contemporary newspaper article reporting on the 23rd Field Regiment's passage overseas extolled the virtues of the Sexton mounts:

Taking a leaf from the strategy books of the American and German forces, the Canadian authorities devised [SP] units to be entirely self-contained and highly mobile. Guns of the battery are mounted directly on a motorized chassis that can quickly grind out their firing positions and straddle across any type of terrain to new positions...these new units don't have to wait for the lumbering tractors, but "go it" themselves. [Similar] American units proved their worth on the sands of North Africa.<sup>23</sup>

With visions of speedy deployments in their minds, Canadian gunners spent hours practicing "quickie" or "crash" actions, where Sextons in convoy would suddenly be ordered to engage targets of opportunity. Although such drills consumed many hours and provided a source of healthy competition among the batteries, the liberation of Northwest Europe was to be quite different from the fight for North Africa. Crash actions did occur from Normandy to Germany, but they were comparatively rare. For the most part, the SP regiments functioned along the lines of their towed counterparts.

A three-quarter view of the Sexton, showing pioneer and maintenance tool stowage on the rear engine deck.



The SP offered clear advantages in cross-country mobility and crew protection, but these features came at a logistical price. A Sexton outweighed its standard towed counterpart by a considerable margin. The carriage-mounted, towed 25-pounder, complete with its 15-cwt field artillery tractor and loaded ammunition trailer, weighed approximately 20,000 pounds - nearly one third the mass of a Sexton. The SP consumed more fuel, exacted a greater toll on roads and bridges, and required additional spares, tools and mechanics for track and drive-train maintenance. But as veteran Bill Turner later joked, the Sexton's bulk was no doubt handy for knocking down trees for firewood during chilly field exercises.<sup>24</sup>

Tracked self-propelled guns were supposed to go where towed artillery dare not venture. Even tracked vehicles, however, were not immune to soft muddy ground. In May 1943, 23rd Field's training area around Sussex was churned up into a bog. Late that month the regiment finally managed to secure two 500-gallon fuel storage tanks and a pump to feed their SP mounts, only to have the roads washed out by mud, impassable to any kind of traffic.<sup>25</sup> With the weight of the Sextons in mind, regimental headquarters issued special road-use orders. As much as possible, drivers were instructed to keep their right track on the shoulder, to minimize the ground pressure exerted on paved roads. Virtually none of the bridges or culverts in the training area could handle a Sexton, so rivers and streams



had to be forded. It was forbidden, however, to drive the mounts in water deeper than 36 inches – they were not yet equipped with waterproofed components. On more than one occasion the mounts bottomed out in muddy creek beds and had to be rescued by recovery vehicles.<sup>26</sup>

Once in England, regimental headquarters faced a series of complaints regarding damage to curbs, sidewalks and other infrastructure. Just as their fathers had been chided for driving horses and transport wagons through cultivated fields and pastures in the last war, the men of Canada's fully mechanized Second World War forces were reprimanded often for inflicting collateral damage with their heavy equipment. The Canadian government grudgingly footed the bill.<sup>27</sup>

The 23rd Field Regiment fired its first rounds from the SP mounts in June 1943, during training at Sussex, New Brunswick. With safety a priority at this early stage, the gunners worked slowly at first. Tragedy was narrowly averted when a shell from one of 31st Battery's guns exploded prematurely, only a few feet from the barrel – possibly because the round was not rammed fully home in the breech. One of the men standing in the Sexton was knocked down to the ground, but was not seriously injured. Tragedy did strike a few weeks later when one of the regiment's Lynx scout cars plunged off a bridge into the Aldouane River; a gunner died instantly in the accident.<sup>28</sup>

After arriving in England in late July 1943, the 23rd Field Regiment continued to prepare

for battle at places like Bustard and Larkhill, the very same ground on which Canadian soldiers had trained during the Great War. There was a good deal of work to be done in a short time. The wide range of skills demanded of an SP regiment came only with hours of practice. As late as November 1943, for example, the regiment's anti-tank skills were found wanting, but most of the small deficiencies could be worked out through additional hours of gun drill.<sup>29</sup> At higher levels, officers participated in "fire and move" exercises, often with a scenario involving the landing of enemy airborne forces in England.<sup>30</sup> As Operation Overlord drew nearer, the gunners participated in offensive schemes, where the English countryside served as France. In March 1944, London played the role of a "French industrial town" in Exercise Last, a II Canadian Corps training scheme. The "opposing" forces were Gruppe Fischer and Gruppe Euler.<sup>31</sup> Despite the intensive training program, veteran Chick Sills later recalled that the regiment rarely had an opportunity to exercise directly in conjunction with armour or infantry, the very elements that the gunners were going to support in combat: "By the time we got into battle, it was a pretty poor time to learn to cooperate with the supported arm. Nowadays you wouldn't think about getting into battle without becoming part of, so to speak, the combined arms of infantry, armour and artillery."<sup>32</sup> Once across the channel, the regiment would have to learn on the job.

Vehicle waterproofing was one of the final chores for the gunners of the 23rd Field to complete before embarking for France. This

Soldiers of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division on exercise in England, April 1943. The vehicle is a Canadian Ram tank without its gun. This may be an OP tank, or possibly a command post tank. German anti-tank gunners could easily differentiate between the specialized Ram models and conventional Shermans – all but one of the 23rd Field Regiment's original OP tanks were lost in action during the fighting of 1944-45.

Photo by C.E. Nye, LAC PA 146662







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A Sexton gun detachment on the move through a battle-damaged town. Two spare road wheels are mounted on the front armour, along with stretchers, and what appears to be a pair of war trophies – captured German steel helmets.

essential, but time consuming and messy task, was necessary for every vehicle that was to be landed across the beaches - even a small amount of salt water in the wrong place could wreak havoc on mechanical components.<sup>33</sup> As it happened, the 23rd Field was fortunate to disembark in Normandy in July 1944 with barely a splash on its tank treads or truck tires. Nevertheless, the costs involved with waterproofing and de-waterproofing influenced military vehicle design after the war. The new Standard Military Pattern (SMP) series of vehicles that appeared in the early

1950s incorporated waterproof engines and drive trains.

As part of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, the 23rd Field Regiment arrived in France as the Battle of Normandy was reaching its climax. On the western Allied flank, American forces had broken through German positions around St. Lô. In the east, meanwhile, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's British and Canadian forces were pushing south of Caen, to gain the Verrières Ridge and advance toward Falaise. The open ground along the arrow-





straight Caen-Falaise highway was flatter than a desert. Any movement above ground during the scorching daylight hours invited small arms, mortar, and artillery fire. With German anti-tank guns dug in across the battlefield, it was a dangerous place for an armoured division. The men of 23rd Field learned of these hazards in short order. On 5 August enemy mortar fire knocked out Captain Jack Donohue's Ram OP tank as he worked in support of an attack by the Lake Superior Regiment and Grenadier Guards against Tilly-la-Campagne. The regiment's first fatality followed three days later when shellfire killed Gunner J.B. King south of Rocquancourt. On 10 August, the regimental office truck was destroyed with the loss of all contents and the death of Bombardier W.G. Richmond.

It was at this stage of the battle, during Operation Totalize, that the British Columbia and Algonquin Regiments were encircled and badly mauled at Point 140, as they attempted to reach Point 195. During the night of 9-10 August, Captain Donohue had gone forward as a FOO to support the attack, only to have his tank knocked out. As German troops closed in, the FOO ordered his crewman to find their way back to friendly lines.<sup>34</sup> Donohue, known for his Irish wit, stayed behind to destroy code books left in the immobilized OP tank. Rumours later reached the regiment to the effect that Donohue's remains had been located and buried by some other outfit. In fact, he had fallen into enemy hands, where he remained very much alive until liberated in April 1945.<sup>35</sup> One of Donohue's crewmen, Lance-Bombardier Lorne Munce, managed to evade enemy troops and reach friendly lines. He was later decorated with the French Croix-de-Guerre.<sup>36</sup>

In 1944 Larry Smith was a GPO with the 23rd Field's 36th Battery, and soon to become the regimental intelligence officer, assistant adjutant and historian. Years later he recalled the final stages of the Battle of Normandy,

You remember the advance over previously-contested ground, and the sun blackened bodies, friend and foe alike, lying sprawled in the final companionship of death. And you remember the livestock, lying with stomachs bloated and legs stiffened to the sky, everywhere you looked, and the smell...You remember the wheat fields burning around your gun position, and abandoned enemy small arms ammunition

exploding like the 24th of May. And the peaceful morning when several divisions were ordered not to move for six hours – and then the bombers came and tanks roared ahead in massed columns and a river was crossed.<sup>37</sup>

Smith's river is probably the Liaison. By Canadian standards it was a stream, crossed on 14 August with the opening of Operation Tractable, the final drive toward Falaise. If the challenge confronting Allied ground forces fighting along the Caen-Falaise highway was not already great enough, they also suffered devastating short-bombings from their own air forces on several occasions. On 15 August, a Spitfire put a Sexton out of action in the 23rd Field's sister SP regiment, the 19th Field. As a small consolation, the gunners of the 23rd made good the recent loss of their regimental office truck when they captured the headquarters van of the German 807th Infantry Regiment, complete with "duplicator and stationary supplies."<sup>38</sup>

The Allies were now boxing the surviving German forces in Normandy into the Falaise pocket. The 23rd Field found itself in a very confused battle zone as relatively small numbers of Canadian and Polish troops struggled to close the German escape route between Trun and Chambois. The regiment's guns were aimed at enemy forces fleeing the pocket along the "corridor of death" to the northeast, towards the Seine, when suddenly a call arrived for fire on a target back in the pocket, to the rear of the regiment's position. In this frenetic instance, the gunners had to make an about turn of 160 degrees. With the limited traverse of the guns, it was necessary to fire up the engines and "slew" the mounts to face the target. Amid all the haste, no one remembered that the mounts were already connected to the troop CP trench with communications cable. As the lumbering machines slewed about, their cables became hopelessly entangled in the tracks, yanking communication equipment out of the CP.<sup>39</sup> The mistake was not repeated again. From then on the cables were slung from poles off the back of each mount, so that they would not get caught up in the tracks in the event of a rapid slew.<sup>40</sup>

As the pace of advance quickened after the closing of the gap, the regiment found itself on the move, to the point that it was running right off the maps. But just when speed was called for, the heavy combat of late August took its toll on



the Sextons. The gun on one mount could not fire because its recoil system was out of order; another mount needed a complete mechanical and electrical overhaul and a third vehicle, with its broken exhaust system, threatened to catch fire at any moment. To add to the problems, the transmission failed in a fourth vehicle – a difficulty never before experienced. The rainy weather and deep mud encountered beyond the Seine River did not ease mobility problems, but the pursuit continued nonetheless. A hint of frustration is evident in a war diary entry from this period, which listed an SP regiment's priorities as follows:

- a) To try and follow an Armoured Regiment which goes all over the countryside
- b) Try not to get lost, and
- c) Provide support when asked - provided the target isn't in one of our numerous "no shelling areas" or "out of range" or "a wrong coding of map reference..." Amusin' but confusin'!<sup>41</sup>

After the fast-paced pursuit from Normandy to the Seine, the regiment engaged in at least one crash action on the way to Belgium. Bill Turner recalls the shoot:

The 31st Battery was travelling in the advance guard as the 4th Armoured Division rushed eastwards. As we passed Dunkirk the enemy guns opened fire on us. One of our FOOs ordered a quick action followed by fire orders. I was the CPO [command post officer] and immediately turned my half-track across a ditch and through a wire fence into a rather small field. I signaled visually to the GPOs to follow and also pointed out troop positions. I think I passed the original 'line' by compass and the SPs quickly came into position and within a minute or two I watched our shells bursting in Dunkirk.<sup>42</sup>

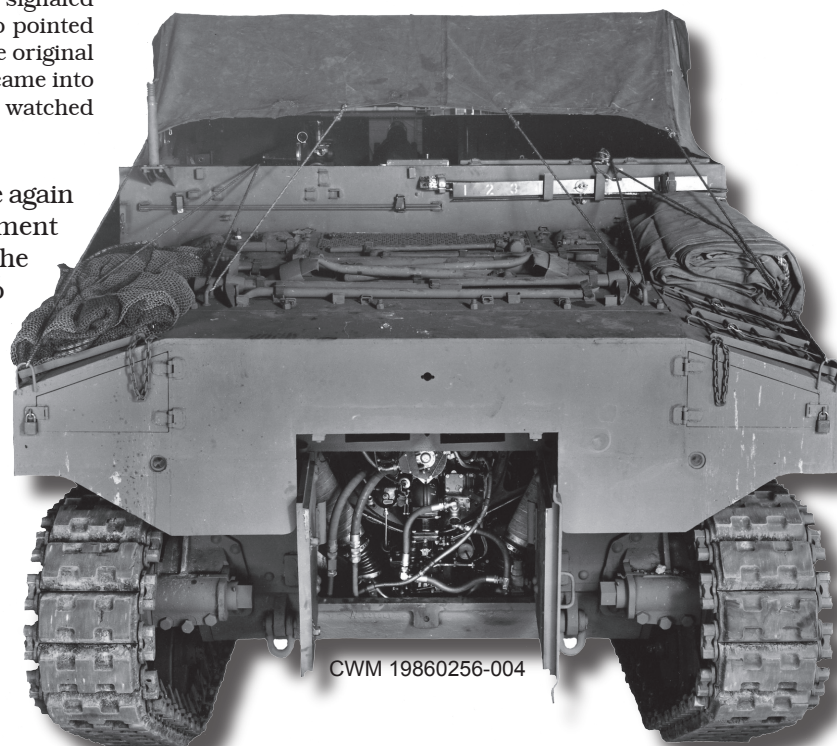
The guns were back in action once again near Eecloo, Belgium, where the regiment remained for several weeks covering the advance across the Leopold Canal into the Breskens Pocket. John Wilkes remembers how a local man from Eecloo pushed an ice cream cart up to each of the four mounts in his

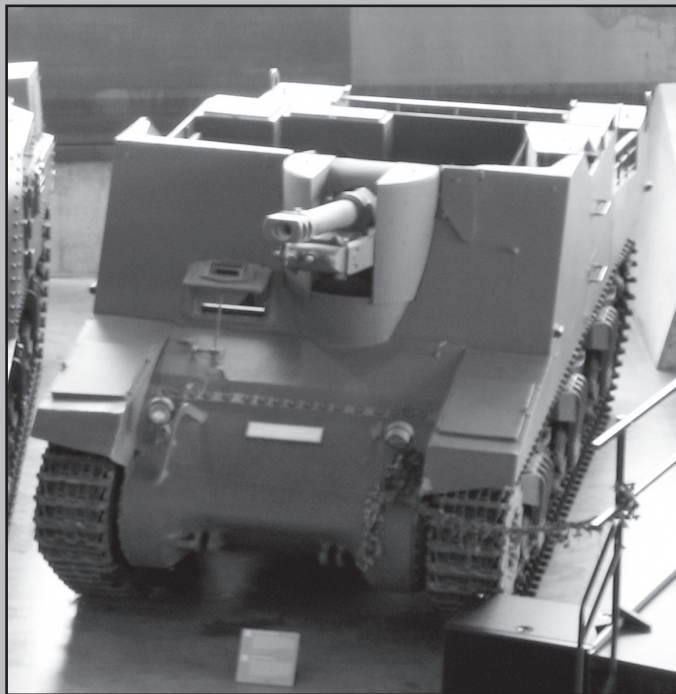
A rear view of a Sexton, showing the canvas tarpaulin installed for wet weather and access to the lower portion of the engine compartment.

troop. Sadly for the young Canadian, no ice cream arrived at the troop command post where he was working. Wilkes was compensated, however, with a very comfortable feather stuffed mattress during off-duty evenings.<sup>43</sup>

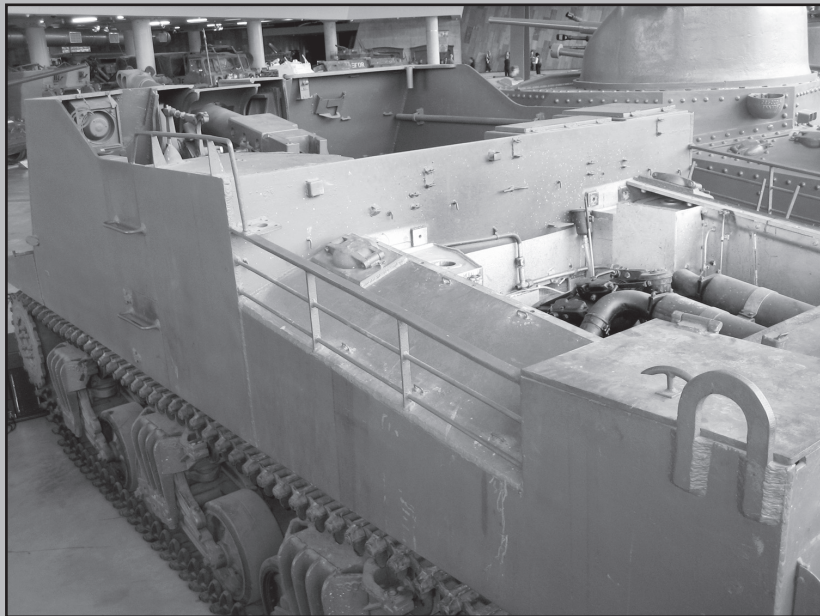
For the gunners the next several weeks witnessed heavy shooting as the Canadians fought hard to open the approaches to the port of Antwerp along the Scheldt estuary. The 23rd Field was very active in the northward drive from Antwerp past Bergen-op-Zoom. Things settled down a little when the regiment reached the s'Hertogenbosch area along the River Maas. Although there was little fighting during the Christmas season, gun positions were set up in the wake of the surprise German offensive in the Ardennes. Fortunately these were not needed in the Canadian sector. At the same time, morale dropped considerably for men who were far from home without much to keep them occupied.<sup>44</sup> But worse was to come for the 4th Canadian Armoured Division in the New Year with Operation Elephant, the battle for the island of Kapelsche Veer in the Maas River. John Wilkes recalls the experience:

Our infantry considered it to be the most deadly, costliest, most miserable five days of the war. It was just much more firing for us [the gunners] except for the night that I had to relieve the OP Able [assistant] for most of the night to give him a break from the cold. It meant sitting in a slit trench on top of a dyke for most of the





### The Sexton at the Canadian War Museum



In the summer of 1992 the Canadian War Museum decided to purchase a Sexton for its permanent collection on the grounds that this piece of equipment was designed and manufactured in Canada, and had served with Canadian forces overseas. The Museum contacted A.F. Budge (Military) Limited, a surplus military equipment dealer in the United Kingdom. Budge offered a considerable variety of Second World War-era vehicles for sale, including the M4A1 Grizzly (the Sherman variant manufactured in Canada), Churchill, Universal Carrier, Kangaroo and Sexton. The particular Sexton (hull number 613) offered to the Canadian War Museum had been left behind in Europe at the end of the war, and later found its way to the Portuguese Army. By the mid-1980s the Portuguese retired and sold off their Sextons on the surplus market, some finding their way back to the United Kingdom.

One of the conditions of the purchase was that the Sexton be in complete working order. Prior to shipment, Budge arranged to restore the vehicle's hull, sandblasting and repainting the entire unit prior to reassembly. Upon delivery at the museum, additional repair work was completed, including the installation of new electrical wiring and a fuel system overhaul. In July 1996 the repatriated Sexton participated in the 125th anniversary celebrations of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery. (Photos by Andrew Iarocci).

night. All the shells had to be loaded on trucks and offloaded at the guns, all by hand. During part of the firing we needed 1,500 time fuses. They arrived – ten minutes after the fire plan was over.<sup>45</sup>

Mobile gun mounts counted for little if the correct fuzes and ammunition were not available.<sup>46</sup>

In February 1945, the regiment crossed the German frontier just in time to participate in Operation Blockbuster, the costly effort to breach German defenses west of the Rhine near Xanten.<sup>47</sup> The winter in Holland had not been

easy, but there was a definite shift toward a darker atmosphere now that the Canadians were fighting on enemy soil. As the regimental war diary noted on 22 February,

We're back to the dugouts again and it's going to take a lot of conditioning after the comfortable houses of Holland in which we have deployed for the past four months. We've got to be tough with the civilians from now on – no smiling, no dating, no girls, no nothing.<sup>48</sup>

For Blockbuster, the 23rd Field was to be one of 19 field and 15 medium regiments firing in support of the drive toward Udem and





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Sexton SP guns of the 8th Field Regiment fire a 21-gun salute to celebrate VE Day in Groningen, Holland, 8 May 1945.

the Hochwald. Relentless German mortar fire reminded the gunners of the previous summer's fighting south of Caen. Heavy rainfall made the roads almost impassable for the regiment's heavy vehicles. For the next week the guns supported the agonizing advance into the Hochwald gap, some of the bloodiest fighting of the war for the 4th Canadian Armoured Division. It was exceptionally dangerous work for the FOOs who went forward with the tanks as well as the ill-fated infantry of the Algonquin and Lake Superior regiments. Captains Clifford Baker and William Buchner worked tirelessly from the sharp end to support the attack. Baker's OP tank was hit and set on fire, and Buchner was wounded twice in the head, but neither officer let up. Both were decorated with the Military Cross for their actions at the Hochwald Gap. Captain William Cowan was no less daring when he set out for the unknown in his OP tank at the head of an armoured force. On 5 March the regimental padre found Cowan's burnt out machine, along with the remains of Bombardier Doug Trumper, a soldier known throughout the regiment as a true gentleman.<sup>49</sup> Cowan and two other crewmen had fallen into enemy hands, but survived to be liberated later that spring.<sup>50</sup>

After Blockbuster the rapid pace of operations continued right through April. The 23rd Field Regiment was to support the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade's "Tiger Group" in the advance on Meppen. On 9 April the guns paused momentarily near Sogel when orders came through for one battery to execute a crash action.

Within minutes the 83rd Battery had pulled off the road and was ready to shoot. Towed guns could never have deployed so quickly.<sup>51</sup>

After the Lake Superior Regiment captured Sogel, recce parties from the 19th and 23rd Field Regiments pulled into the northern outskirts of town. In the morning fog of 10 April, a group of heavily armed Germans infiltrated some houses and woods in the area, launching a counterattack against the artillerymen. No Canadian infantrymen were nearby. In the ensuing melee, Sextons from the 36th Battery fired at German paratroopers over open sights. With automatic weapons blazing, Lieutenant Harry Smith and Lance-Bombardier Bruce MacArthur destroyed a machine gun position with their OP tank. When the smoke cleared a number of Germans lay dead, with a half-dozen more taken prisoner.<sup>52</sup> The 23rd Field also suffered several casualties: Gunner Vic Hubacheck was killed instantly, while Gunner George Buchanan and Lieutenant Doug Denton later died of wounds.

The 23rd Field Regiment was in position near Oldenburg when the war ended in May 1945. In ten months of fighting, 25 men had been killed in action and more than 60 wounded. Six were captured, but all of these were liberated in April 1945. Each of the regiment's SP mounts and OP tanks logged an average of 1,500 to 1,700 miles. No gun mounts were lost in action, but only one of the original OP tanks survived the entire campaign in Northwest Europe.<sup>53</sup>



The end of the war was not the end of the line for the Sexton in Canadian service. Four militia artillery regiments continued to operate Sextons in peacetime, while one regular force battery also used the mounts briefly during 1949-50. By 1956, 12 of the 31 Sextons in Canada were operational. Since the Ram tank had long been scrapped, and the towed 25-pounders were retired in 1957, the surviving fleet of Sextons was increasingly difficult to maintain. Although the Sexton remained in the 1960 Canadian Army Catalogue of Ordnance Stores (Vehicle and Tracked Equipments), the last machines were withdrawn from Canadian and British service in the late 1950s.<sup>54</sup> Some of the surviving Sextons were sold to Portugal, where they continued in service for about two more decades.<sup>55</sup> The Indian, Italian and South African forces also used Sextons after 1945.<sup>56</sup>

The Sexton was designed in a historical context where it seemed that speed, mobility and firepower were the universal ingredients of success. As the experience of the 23rd Field Regiment shows, the operational reality in Northwest Europe during 1944-45 was somewhat different. Flooded roads and German anti-tank guns proved that tracked vehicles did not own

the battlefield. Nevertheless, the young Canadians who drove the Sextons from Normandy to Germany shared a genuine affection for their machines. Firing the guns was exhausting, dirty and noisy work, but action kept spirits high.<sup>57</sup> Bill Turner stayed on with the Canadian Army after the war, retiring in 1977, and serving subsequently as Colonel Commandant of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery from 1979 through 1986. As an emotional reminder of Turner's wartime service, a restored Sexton rumbled on to the square and carried the veteran artilleryman off to the mess on his final parade at CFB Shilo. The occasion brought back many memories.<sup>58</sup>

Notes

The author wishes to thank William W. Turner, Clifford R. Baker, Larry McNabb, Larry Hollerman, Herb Danter and John Wilkes for their contribution to this article. All are veterans of the 23rd Field Regiment.

- 1. See David Fletcher, *The British Tanks, 1915-19* (Ramsbury, UK, 2001), p.61.
- 2. On the Bishop and Priest, see Terry Gander, *25-Pounder Gun – Part 2* (London, 1983). Priests continued in British and Canadian service even after the Sexton was available.

Militia gunners take a break during training at Lethbridge, Alberta, 1947. In contrast with the wartime Sexton shown on page 10, these peacetime machines are clean and polished – unencumbered with the extra kit and spares carried during wartime operations.







3. Army Historical Section Report No. 38, "Tank Production in Canada," 27 July 1950, Directorate of History and Heritage. Doug Knight offers a comprehensive discussion of design, trials, modifications and production in *The Sexton SP Gun in Canadian Service* (Ottawa, 2006). David Fletcher explores Sexton variants in "Sexton SP Guns," *Wheels & Tracks*, No. 53, pp.18-25.
4. Complete specifications may be found in *Operators' Manual, 25 Pr SP Tracked, Sexton II* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, December 1944).
5. The description of gun drill is based on correspondence with John Wilkes, Larry Holleran and Bill Turner, all former members of the 23rd Field Regiment. Also see *Gun Drill for QF 25-PR Gun on Ram Chassis (Sexton)* (Ottawa, 1946).
6. George G. Blackburn, *The Guns of Normandy: A Soldier's Eye View, France 1944* (Toronto, 1995), pp.26-28.
7. War Diary (WD), 23rd Field Regiment, 15 June 1943, Library and Archives of Canada (LAC), Record Group (RG) 24, Series C-3, Volume (Vol) 14535.
8. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, June-July 1942, Vol.14535.
9. For the regimental war establishment, see LAC, RG 24, Vol.12478, File 157/69, Organisation & Administration, 23rd Field Regiment Self Propelled.
10. Knight, p.5.
11. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, April 1943, Vol.14535.
12. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 10 May 1943, Vol.14535.
13. Part I Order, 9 November 1943, RG 24, Series C-3, Vol.14536.
14. On the intricacies of driver training, see Part I Order No. 120, 3 May 1943, Vol.14535.
15. Part I Order No. 70, 10 October 1943, Vol.14536.
16. Part I Order No. 71, 11 October 1943 and No. 86, 26 October 1943, Vol.14536.
17. Canadian War Museum (CWM) Interview Transcript 31D 1, Sills, November 2000.
18. G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment Canadian Artillery, Volume 2* (Toronto, 1967), p.310.
19. *Operators' Manual, Sexton 25 Pr SP Tracked* (Ottawa, September 1943), p.23.
20. Part I Order No. 141, 10 June 1943, Vol.14535.
21. Correspondence, W.W. Turner to John Wilkes, 5 July 2006.
22. All regimental officers were instructed to view this "excellent picture" at a special showing in Sussex. See Part I Order No. 103, 1 May 1943, Vol.14536.
23. "Mobile Artillery Units Make Canadian History," *Mail & Empire* (Toronto), 2 August 1943.
24. Turner to Wilkes, 5 July 2006.
25. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 28 May 1943, Vol.14535.
26. Part I Order No. 120, 20 May 1943; WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 16 June 1943, Vol.14535.
27. Part I Order No. 64, 4 October 1943, Vol.14536.
28. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 2, 28 June 1943, Vol.14535.
29. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, November 1943, Appendix 19, Vol.14536.
30. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, November 1943, Practice Camp - Larkhill, Vol.14536.
31. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, March 1944, Exercise Last, Vol.14536.
32. Sills Interview Transcript, p.8.
33. See *Vehicle Data Book, Canadian Army Overseas*, p.205.
34. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 5-10 August 1944, Vol.14536.
35. Sills Interview Transcript, 13; Lawrence N. Smith, *The History of the 23rd Field Regiment (SP) RCA, April 1942 to May 1945*, p.78.
36. "Munce Won Croix-de-Guerre on Battlefields of Normandy," *The SP* 25 August 1945, pp.5-6.
37. Larry Smith, "Memories of a Maelstrom," 1986.
38. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 15-19 August 1944, Vol.14536.
39. Sills Interview Transcript, pp.13-14.
40. Correspondence, Chick Sills to John Wilkes, 18 December 1996.
41. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 24-31 August 1944, Vol.14536.
42. Correspondance with the author, August 2007.
43. "War Service of Bombardier John B. Wilkes," p.6.
44. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, Appendix 6, December 1944, Vol.14536.
45. "War Service of Bombardier John B. Wilkes," p.8.
46. Nicholson, p.395.
47. On Blockbuster, see Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (Toronto, 2006), pp.228-241.
48. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 22 February 1945, Vol.14536.
49. *SP* (Lochem, Holland: J. Scheen, 1945), p.58. This source is a compilation of articles and photographs from *The SP*, the 23rd Field's regimental newspaper.
50. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 25 February-5 March 1945, Vols 14536-14537; Smith, *The History of the 23rd*, pp.65-66.
51. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 9 April 1945, Vol.14537; Knight, p.3.
52. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 10 April 1945, Vol.14537; Smith, *The History of the 23rd*, p.70; Nicholson, p.438.
53. Smith, *The History of the 23rd*, pp.76-79.
54. *Generic Listing of Vehicle and Tracked Equipments, Engineering Equipments and Attachments* (AHQ: Ottawa, March 1960), C-54.
55. Knight, 20.
56. Fletcher, "Sexton SP Guns," p.24.
57. WD, 23rd Field Regiment, 7 June 1943, Vol.14535.
58. Turner to Wilkes, 5 July 2006.
59. CWM Accession File 19930021-001.

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